

Subject, Object and Idea

The Subject Develops from Abstract to Concrete

The three books of the Logic are laid out in a logical sequence, and they describe a process of development, but the realized process of development does not take the form of a temporal *succession* of these categories. The categories of Being which come into being and pass away, *continue* to come and go indefinitely. The succession of oppositions which overtake one another in Essence continue to generate polar opposite pairs of determinations. As these unfold, a new form of social practice develops self-consciousness, with a succession of new qualities, new entities, new relations, both incidental and necessary, registered in thoughts and purposive activity and representations, and judged and people may draw from these experiences a more concrete understanding of the new social practice as it develops. So in terms of time, all these relations are happening at the same time, although there is a logical dependence of the later categories on the former.

The development described in the Doctrine of the Notion is the development of a Concept.

In the first place, what is described is what is *necessary* in the development, as opposed to what is contingent or accidental or as the result of some caprice, so the logical process differs from the historical process in that respect.

Secondly, the subject domain of the Logic is *shapes of consciousness*, or more precisely, *elements of shapes of consciousness*, which are concepts. But a concept is to be understood, in the same way as a shape of consciousness, as a regular system of activity which is organised around some conception which may be understood by the participants as a entity of some kind, that is, it is reified. Self-consciousness here implies that people involved in that system of activity bring together the forms of activity, their individual understanding of what they are doing and the representation of the activity into a consistent stable relationship. The series of judgments and syllogisms represent the moves towards the formation of that stable and mature relationship, and it is that consistent, worked-out relationship which brings about a stable reification.

Finally, in tracing the development of these relationships within a formation of consciousness, three different aspects are always involved: the relations and collaborative activity of people which is integrated into the formation of

consciousness, the consciousness of the individual people involved and the representations – words, symbols, artefacts and so on – used in the collaboration.

So this means that the process is exhibited in subjective thoughts (insofar as they follow what is necessary), social movements (or projects, self-conscious systems of practice sharing a conception of what it is people are doing) and the representations or systems of cultural artefacts, and the Logic is open to interpretation in *each* of these domains.

Sublation

The relation between the earlier and the later relations in the Logic is that of sublation, *Aufhebung*; Hegel uses the term ‘sublation’ throughout the Logic, including the relation in which one determination *passes into* another in the sphere of Being, the relation in which one opposition is *overtaken by* another in the sphere of Essence, and the way in which, in the Doctrine of the Notion, successive determinations are *taken up* by the subject.

Aufhebung means to take something beyond its own limits and ‘negating’ it, that is to say, by *maintaining* what was necessary in the former relation while *terminating* that which is no longer tenable. This expresses the basic organizing principle of the Logic. It’s like when something is done away with because it is outmoded, but its real meaning is carried on in a new form.

The form of sublation which subjectivity undergoes is a process of objectification, on top of which there is a continuous reassertion of subject and object in new forms which have the effect of sublating the distinctions between different subjects into higher or more robust forms of internal relation.

This is related to an aspect of Hegelian thought which can be confusing. Hegel talks about a process and its ‘truth’ as more or less the same thing, so he will talk about something which obviously doesn’t have the attributes which would be expected of the thing. To the non-Hegelian this seems to be flying in the face of plain facts.

For Hegel, there is ultimately only *one concept*, the Idea, which we can understand as the whole of the social life of a community, and the specific concepts relating to this or that special activity, are ultimately just aspects or special moments of the totality.

But first, let us follow the subject-object relation in terms of how Hegel outlines the structure of the Object.

Objectification: Mechanism, Chemism, Teleology (Means and Ends)

Subject-Object is a relation; subject and object are not different kinds of thing, but simply that the subject stands in relation to other subjects as to an object. So the subject-object relation is the relation between a system of social practice and others which are relatively foreign to it, lie outside of it. But the normal situation is that means of mediation between subjects do exist in a community, and we are not dealing with a confrontation of the kind of the master-servant narrative, in which no means of mediation exists.

Hegel looks at three grades of subject-object relation: Mechanism, Chemism and Teleology. You can visualize these relations in terms of relations between projects, social movements and institutions, such as a town plan, feminism, legal system and science, or different ethnic communities within a multicultural society, and so on, as well as concepts like computer communication, therapy, childhood, or whatever, a relation between one project (the subject) which is new, "abstract," and others which are already institutionalized and constitute the existing social context.

Firstly, Mechanism. This is how Hegel describes Mechanism:

"As objectivity is the totality of the Notion withdrawn into its unity, an immediate is thereby posited that is in and for itself this totality ... In so far as it has the Notion immanent in it, it contains the difference of the Notion, but on account of the objective totality, the differentiated moments are *complete and self-subsistent objects* which consequently, even in their relation, stand to one another only as *self-subsistent* things and remain *external* to one another in every combination. This is what constitutes the character of *mechanism*, namely, that whatever relation obtains between the things combined, this relation is one *extraneous* to them that does not concern their nature at all, and even if it is accompanied by a semblance of unity it remains nothing more than *composition, mixture, aggregation* and the like. *Spiritual* mechanism also, like *material*, consists in this, that the things related in the spirit remain external to one another and to spirit itself. A *mechanical style of thinking, a mechanical memory, habit, a mechanical way of acting*, signify that the peculiar pervasion and presence of spirit is lacking in what spirit apprehends or does." (*Science of Logic* §1543)

This brings to mind a multicultural society in which the 'ethnic mosaic' metaphor applies, that is, a collection of self-sufficient communities mutually indifferent to one another, which may interact, but in the way of external impact on one another,

in which neither community modifies its own nature, just adjusts its activity to accommodate or resist the impact of another community; or sciences, each of which is pursuing its own research program, perhaps using the findings of another as instruments in their own work, but remaining separate branches of science; or a social movement that regards all other movements as irrelevant to themselves, that turn up to protest against something and happen to find other social movements there as well, and may go so far as agreeing the date and place of the protest, but no further.

Hegel follows the development of Mechanism through the concept of mechanical objects to mechanical processes to systems of mechanical relations, particularly where one object creates a centre around which others revolve. He likens Mechanism to systems of government in which the components are united mechanically, and traces the development of relations between individuals (I), organisations (P) and the state (U) using the idea of Syllogisms, an approach he uses again in the *Philosophy of Right*.

The second section of Objectivity is Chemism, where the subject and object have an *affinity* to one another based in the own nature of each. So here the subject and object are not wholly external to one another, but recognise a relation within themselves, like social movements that recognise that both are fighting a common enemy, and in making common cause strengthen that affinity and even merge. Again Hegel follows the development from Chemical Object to Chemical process, and uses the Syllogisms developed earlier to trace the relation between Individual, Universal and Particular through which these processes develop, gradually dealing with the one-sidedness of the Subjective Syllogisms.

Hegel wants to derive the notions of the Physics, Chemistry and Biology of his times logically and is preparing the basis for his Philosophy of Nature in this section, but its usefulness in this respect is questionable. There is a fine line between intelligibility and rationality which Hegel often transgresses. But he does sketch out a plausible, escalating series of categories through which a subject objectifies itself, and ideas drawn from the natural sciences serve nicely for this purpose: a subject is abstract at the beginning and finds the outer world foreign and indifferent to it, and in that sense is a concept in-itself. Then through the discovery of affinities it develops relations with all the other subjects in the community, and there is a certain amount of the melting-pot under way.

Hegel did not have at his disposal a viable natural scientific theory to explain the appearance of teleology in the natural world of plants and animals, but the teleology was undeniably *real*. Kant had recognised this problem as well and concluded that it went beyond the valid limits of knowledge to conclude from the

appearance of the teleological character of the organic world that there was a Designer or Final Cause behind it or otherwise to explain it. Hegel's aim was to demonstrate that the emergence of teleological relations was logically *necessary*. But he was opposed to any theory of evolution, whether inheritance of acquired characteristics or survival of the fittest, to do this job.

Hegel held that in Nature there was no development in time, but this does not exclude relations of logical priority in Nature.

"The more the teleological principle was linked with the concept of an *extramundane* intelligence and to that extent was favoured by piety, the more it seemed to depart from the true investigation of nature, which aims at cognising the properties of nature not as extraneous, but as *immanent determinatenesses* and accepts only such cognition as a valid *comprehension*. As end is the Notion itself in its Existence, it may seem strange that the cognition of objects from their Notion appears rather as an unjustified trespass into a *heterogeneous* element, whereas mechanism, for which the determinateness of an object is a determinateness posited in it externally and by another object, is held to be a *more immanent* point of view than teleology." (*Science of Logic* §1595)

Hegel concludes that End emerges as the truth of Mechanism and Chemism, that a Notion *strives* to objectify itself.

"End ... is the concrete universal, which possesses in its own self the moment of particularity and externality and is therefore active and the urge to repel itself from itself. The Notion, as End, is of course an objective judgment in which one determination, the subject, namely the concrete Notion, is self-determined, while the other is not merely a predicate but external objectivity. But the end relation is not for that reason a reflective judging that considers external objects only according to a unity, as though an intelligence had given this unity for the convenience of our cognitive faculty; on the contrary it is the absolute truth that judges objectively and determines external objectivity absolutely. Thus the End relation is more than judgment; it is the syllogism of the self-subsistent free Notion that unites itself with itself through objectivity." (*Science of Logic* §1599)

So here the subject finds in the object, in other subjects, its own End, or as it is sometimes said, the Subject finds its own essence outside of itself. Thus the development here is one in which the Subject is to become *in and for itself* through

the process of mutual transformation of object and subject, which is the basis for the Idea.

The process of Teleology is the dialectic of Means and Ends. We have two maxims: on the one hand, “the end justifies the means,” and on the other, “the movement is everything the end nothing.” Both these maxims are limited and one-sided. The subject strives to realize its End, at first by inadequate means, and the Realised End expresses the disharmony between the Means and the *Subjective* End; this leads to a reconception of the End and determination of a new Means more adequate to the End. Finally, *there can be no contradiction between the Means and Realised End*, ultimately the Subject realises that the Means and End are identical.

This leads to the final section of the *Logic*, which is The Idea, the dialectic of Life and Cognition.

The Idea is the unity of Life and Cognition

With this final section of the *Logic*, we see the return of the original idea that Hegel presented in the *System of Ethical Life*: the Idea as a process in which the contradiction between sensation and reason is overcome through a long drawn-out process of differentiation and re-integration, objectification and internalisation, with a continual interchange between means and ends.

So the Idea is a dialectic of Life and Cognition, it is both a learning process and a life process. Truth is the correspondence of Subject and Object, but both subject and object have been conceived of as part of a single process of development.

In the section on Life, Hegel discusses the relationship of Individual and Genus: the Genus can live only in and through the finite mortal individuals which realize it, and conversely the individual finds *its truth* in its Genus.

“That is to say, the process of the genus, in which the single individuals sublate in one another their indifferent immediate existence and in this negative unity expire, has further for the other side of its product the *realised genus*, which has posited itself identical with the Notion. In the genus process, the separated individualities of individual life perish; the negative identity in which the genus returns into itself, while it is on the one hand the process of *generating individuality*, is on the other hand the *sublating of it*, and is thus the genus coming together with itself, the *universality* of the Idea in process of *becoming for itself*. ” (*Science of Logic* §1676)

The category of Life leads to the category of *Cognition*: “Life is the immediate Idea, or the Idea as its *Notion* not yet realised in its own self. In its *judgment*, the Idea is *cognition* in general.” (*Science of Logic* §1677) In the section on Cognition, Hegel takes up the Idea of *the True* and the Idea of *the Good*, and the unity of the True and the Good, which is the Absolute Idea. In the section on the True, Hegel deals with the relation between *Analytical Cognition and Synthetic Cognition*, and Definitions and the Division of subject matter in a science.

Hegel sees Cognition as a Syllogism in which the first two terms are Analytical and Synthetic Cognition, but even this formulation shows itself to be defective:

“Similarly, [the unity of analytic and synthetic cognition] finds propositions and laws, and proves their necessity, but not as a necessity of the subject matter in and for itself, that is, not from the Notion, but as a necessity of the cognition that works on given determinations, on the differences of the phenomenal aspect of the subject matter, and cognises for itself the proposition as a unity and relationship, or cognises the ground of phenomena from the phenomena themselves.” (*Science of Logic* §1721)

Likewise Hegel requires that the definition of the concepts in a science and the division of the subject matter in a science be determined immanently from the Notion of the science, not arbitrarily or subjectively introduced from without.

The final concept of the *Logic* is the Absolute Idea which appears as the unity of the Theoretical Idea and the Practical Idea, that is, the identity of a practical form of life with its own self-understanding, a *concrete* identity arrived at through the long-drawn out process described. The chapter on the Absolute Idea, like the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*, and like the “Twelve Days of Christmas,” is a recapitulation of the whole structure leading up to itself, emphasizing the idea of concreteness as sublation.

And in a final unbelievable leap of Hermetic magic, the truth of the Idea is Nature:

“The Idea, namely, in positing itself as absolute unity of the pure Notion and its reality and thus contracting itself into the immediacy of being, is the totality in this form – nature.” (*Science of Logic* §1817)

Hegel's critique of the individual/society dichotomy

So what we have seen is that Hegel presented a critique of all aspects of social life by an exposition of the logic of formations of consciousness, which does not take the individual person as its unit of analysis but rather a *concept*. A concept is understood, not as some extramundane entity but a *practical relation among people* mediated by 'thought objects', i.e., artefacts.

If we understand that human beings live in an environment of thought-objects constructed by their own purposive activity, and that thinking, insofar as it is correct, reflects the objective relations between these thought-objects, then this would seem to be a viable approach to science, and the basis for a genuinely self-construing method of science.

Looked at with the benefit of 200 years of hindsight, the philosophy has its problems, this is undeniable, but recent currents of philosophy, such as "post-humanism," which pride themselves in having "deconstructed the subject," invariably make the target of their critique a Kantian or Cartesian individual subject, overlooking Hegel's solution of this problem, often by dismissing Hegel on the basis of side-issues without confronting his achievement in overcoming the aporias in Kant's notion of the subject or the Cartesian dichotomy. And Hegel built a philosophy which overcame the contradictions inherent in Kantian individualism without the sacrifice of an *ethical theory*, without the sacrifice of a concept of genuine individuality, whilst retaining a strong concept of Freedom.

In the *Logic*, Hegel resolves the individual / society dichotomy *as a problem in social science* by means of the Individual / Universal / Particular relation. This is not the same issue as the problem of how a subject conceives of itself in relation to the whole community. That is a problem of the historical development of consciousness, which is dealt with in the *Phenomenology*. But the *Logic* does suggest a solution to this problem as well. We see that Subjectivity is a multiplicity of processes and relations in which individuals collaborate with one another in particular forms of social practice organised around different universals. This approach is far more fruitful than setting up two poles – the individual and 'society' (whatever that means) – and then trying to draw some connection between them. By taking the concept, in the sense described already, as his 'unit of analysis', rather than the individual person, Hegel has produced a powerful and nuanced conception of the human being. Note how far also he has come from the initial investigations into the psychology of peoples; this is something radically different.

This approach allows us to see that the individual may have a whole variety of different conceptions of truth and their capacity to verify their own truth, reflected

in the multitude of conceptions of the Absolute outlined in the *Logic*. So the relation of the individual to society which is developed in the *Logic* is, on the one hand, the relation between a person and the state, and the various mediating forms of association, developed in the *Philosophy of Right*, and on the other hand, the very decentered, shifting view of subjectivity constructed through participation in a multiplicity of self-conscious projects, or systems of social practice.

Spirit and Substance and Subject

Hegel's philosophy is certainly very strange and difficult to grasp. But we need to remember that his ideas were developed in response to specific and difficult problems in philosophy which were demanding resolution at that time. The problems at issue were chiefly those that arose from Kant's attempts to rescue science from an impossible relativism. So we should not lightly condemn Hegel, but rather give him credit for having produced a science, although a science with some important difficulties. We should take him at his word when he says that Spirit is the nature of human beings en masse. All human communities construct their social environment, both in the sense of physically constructing the artefacts which they use in the collaborating together, and in the sense that, in the social world at least, things are what they are only because they are so construed. The idea of spirit needs to be taken seriously. It may seem odd to say, as Hegel does, that *everything is thought*, but it is no more viable to say that everything is matter and if you want to use a dichotomy of thought and matter instead things get even worse.

No-one else has produced anything that can rival his *Logic*; and he left no room for imitators. It should be taken seriously.

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